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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBOLLAH ASKS FOR ISF ASSISTANCE TO
COMBAT GROWING CRIME

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The Lebanese Internal Security Forces recently have been granted the power to access and enforce the law within Lebanese regions and suburbs previously controlled by Hizbollah. At the request and urging of Hizbollah, the ISF two weeks ago began to police and to arrest individuals involved in drug crimes, auto thefts and prostitution rings in the Bekaa and Dahiyeh, Hizbollah-controlled areas previously off-limits to Lebanon's security forces. ISF leaders attribute the change to a resolution of the political impasse following the Doha Accord. Two other important factors contributed to this enhanced security access: Hizbollah's concern about the growth of independent criminal elements who do not follow their dictates, and Hizbollah's aversion to alienating its constituency by taking the lead in cracking down on the criminals, or the farmers who profit from hashish cultivation, who are often Hizbollah supporters. End Summary.

ISF ENTERS THE BEKAA AND DAHIYEH AT THE REQUEST OF HIZBOLLAH

12. (C) In a meeting with INL Director on October 23, Internal Security Forces (ISF) Director General Achraf Rifi verified that the ISF now is taking an active security role in policing and enforcing criminal laws within Dahiyeh, a Beirut suburb long controlled by Hizbollah and the Bekaa, a fertile agricultural region, which is also the center of Lebanese hashish cultivation and under the strong political influence of Hizbollah. Rifi explained that the recent lessening of political and sectarian tensions between the government and Hizbollah helped to facilitate the assumption of the policing function by the ISF in these previously closed areas. He emphasized that it was Hizbollah and Amal who had appealed to the ISF for law enforcement assistance in order to protect their families, who were suffering from greatly increased incidences of drug trafficking, car thefts and prostitution, particularly in Dahiyeh.

13. (C) General Michel Chakkour, the head of ISF's Drug Enforcement Bureau, informed INL Director in an earlier meeting on October 20 that ISF drug enforcement officers now have much broader access to the Bekaa. He attributes the change in attitude to both improved political stability after the Doha agreement and the election of a president and government, and the recognition by Hizbollah that the drug dealers are growing too strong and too independent for Hizbollah to control on its own. Both Rifi and Chakkour mentioned the concern of Hizbollah that their areas were out of control with crime and that their own families were feeling unsafe.

WIN-WIN SITUATION FOR HIZBOLLAH

14. (C) General Chakkour commented that Hizbollah's decision to ask the ISF for law enforcement assistance is a win-win situation for Hizbollah. It simultaneously shows the broader public that Hizbollah is willing to engage with the Lebanese state and its security agencies, while providing ISF law enforcement expertise to protect its families and constituents from the growing tide of criminal activity in Hizbollah's areas of influence, he opined. Furthermore, he suggested that any potential backlash from the apprehended drug dealers and criminals (many of whom are Hizbollah supporters) will be directed at the ISF, and not at Hizbollah.
ONGOING RAIDS AND CRIMINAL ARRESTS IN HIZBOLLAH CONTROLLED REGIONS

15. (C) Two weeks ago the ISF increased its presence in the Bekaa and Dahiye. Over the last ten days they have closed down four gambling halls, arrested 16 small drug dealers, three prostitution pimps and 106 individuals with outstanding warrants in Dahiye. According to the ISF, all operations and arrests were coordinated with Hizbollah authorities.

16. (C) An extensive joint operation by the ISF and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) conducted several raids on October 23 in the Bekaa, aimed at arresting drug dealers and traffickers. In particular, the ISF was targeting Noah Zaitar, a 37 year old Shia and one of the largest drug barons in the Bekaa, wanted on 487 criminal charges ranging from drug trafficking, car theft and terrorism to weapons dealing, fraud, kidnapping and extortion. Zaitar had recently openly flaunted his wealth, power, and perceived invincibility to the press. He boasts, with no trepidation, that he answers to nobody or any

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political party. Although Zaitar escaped arrest on October 23 by surrounding himself with a small army of over 100 armed guards and amid farmers and local villagers who feel indebted to him, 42 other drug dealers were arrested in the Bekaa. The ISF will try again this week to arrest Zaitar and will continue its joint ISF/LAF campaign to arrest drug dealers and stem drug trafficking in and from the Bekaa.
HASHISH ERADICATION PROGRAMS - PRISONER OF POLITICAL TENSION

17. (C) The ISF Drug Enforcement Bureau believes that drug eradication campaigns will be able to restart next year if the good law enforcement working relationship between the ISF and Hizbollah continues, and as long as the political situation remains stable. No hashish eradication has taken place since 2005. In both 2006 and 2007, the LAF, which provides protection to the ISF during its eradication program, was overstretched with other security responsibilities (the Israel/Lebanon war in 2006 and Fatah al Islam in Nahr el Bared in 2007) and therefore could not help.

Both Rifi and Chakkour attribute the lack of hashish eradication operations in the Bekaa in 2008 to a lack of political will on the part of the government and army to make the decision to confront the farmers and enter the region. Rifi explained that the LAF was not able to assist this year due to "internal conflicts," and therefore the ISF could not risk entering the area alone to confront angry and previously violent farmers protecting their crops. When asked to clarify what he meant by internal conflicts, Rifi said internal confessional and sectarian conflicts and the political tensions caused by lack of a president, government and army commander. It was just too dangerous to enter the Bekaa during the political crisis after May, and no one in the government was willing to make the decision to proceed, Rifi added.

PROSPECTS FOR NEXT SUMMER'S CROP DESTRUCTION PROGRAMS AND CONTINUED ISF RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE BEKAA AND DAHIYEH

18. (C) Both Rifi and Chakkour are optimistic that an eradication program will take place next summer, assuming that there is a stable and supportive government, and the LAF is otherwise available to provide the necessary security support. If the time to eradicate were now (which it is not - eradication generally takes place in August), the ISF

commanders say the government would support it, and the Army would be willing and ready to assist.

¶9. (C) Rifi was optimistic that the current improved political situation and Hizbollah's concern about increased lawlessness without police protection will smooth the way for the ISF to continue undisturbed its law enforcement responsibilities throughout the areas previously off-limits to the ISF, and that Hizbollah will not disrupt ISF's activities as they had in the very recent past. There are reports in the press that ISF's policing authority in the Bekaa or Dahiye is not limitless, however. In return for continued ISF access, Hizbollah's political authority must be allowed to continue as always in those areas, and any crackdown by the ISF should not target its weapons, reports the press. Even with this restriction, the ISF's expanded access should alleviate and hinder the growing incidence of car thefts and prostitution and should serve as a deterrent to the drug traffickers.

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